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WHAT IS NEW IN RURAL EDUCATION--NFIRE.

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RURAL EDUCATION IS DEFINED AS THAT WHICH PREVAILS IN SPARSELY POPULATED AREAS AND SMALL RURAL COMMUNITIES (LESS THAN 2500 POPULATION). FACTORS USUALLY FOUND WITH SUCH SCHOOL OFFERINGS, INCLUDE SPARSITY OF POPULATION, SMALL SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS, ISOLATION FROM CULTURAL EVENTS, AND REMOTENESS FROM EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES. SUCH FACTORS AS THESE HELP TO CAUSE A BROAD GAP BETWEEN THE AVERAGE RURAL SCHOOL AND THE AVERAGE URBAN SCHOOL IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS. VARIOUS SMALL SCHOOLS PROJECTS HAVE BEEN INITIATED TO CLOSE THIS GAP. RECOGNIZING THIS SURGE IN RURAL EDUCATION EFFORTS, TWENTY FIVE INTERESTED EDUCATORS MET IN SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH, ON APRIL 28, 1967 TO PLAN THE NATIONAL FEDERATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF RURAL EDUCATION (NFIRE). THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS ORGANIZATION ARE TO PROVIDE AN ON-GOING EFFORT TO REACH THE GOAL OF COMPARABLE EDUCATION FOR RURAL YOUTH, AND TO COORDINATE EFFORTS IN RURAL EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION RECORD, VOL. 52, NOS. 8 AND 9, MAY-JUNE, 1967. (SF)

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What is New in Rural Education: NFIRE

A. W. Sturges and Edward Krahmer

What is the National Federation for the Improvement of Rural Education and what are its aims? This question can best be answered by giving a brief history, and a definition of rural education. First the definition: just what is meant when the terms "rural education" or "small schools" are used? Rural education is that which prevails in sparsely populated areas and small rural communities (less than 2,500 population). The schools are almost always small, averaging less than 100 students per grade. Factors which are usually found in connection with a school offering "rural education" are sparsity of population, small school enrollments, isolation from cultural events and remoteness from educational opportunities beyond that offered through the local school. Usually considerable travel is required to accomplish anything more than what local community resources provide. The economy is principally related to the production of raw materials (agriculture, mining, lumbering etc.) rather than finished products.

With this definition in mind, it is obvious that we in the United States are fortunate in that our country has given more than lip service to "equal education for all". Our rural education systems date from the beginnings of the United States. When compulsory education laws were passed in the 19th century, rural education did not lag far behind the urban areas in making at least a minimal amount of education available to most rural youth. From this chapter in the history of the nation comes the one room "little red schoolhouse", located within walking distance of almost any farm or ranch. As progressively more and better education was offered in urban areas throughout the remainder of the 19th, and the first half of the 20th century, rural education continued to follow suit although at a slower pace and on a smaller scale in many states. Even by 1950, while striving for equal education for all, rural educators had to admit that at best they were still striving, there still existed a gap between the average rural school and the average urban school in the educational programs offered.

In the 1950's, a new breed of educators came into prominence with a new idea: why not establish projects combining many schools in a rather small area for the purpose of exerting a concerted effort to solve the more acute problems of rural education? The first of these projects, the Catskill Area Small Schools Projects, was shortly followed by the Rocky Mountain Small School Project, and in the 1960's by additional projects such as the Western States Small Schools Project, the Southern Association Small Schools Project, and North Dakota's Upper Midwest Small Schools Project. All these projects aimed at one common goal; to demonstrate that a small rural school can offer an education comparable to that in the large urban school, requiring only, among other things, revised teaching methods such as individualization of instruction, new organizational and staffing

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procedures, greater reliance on technology and probably not too much extra money.

Successes of these projects have been many; the goal of a comparable education for rural youth is much closer than it was twenty years ago. Particularly promising is the fact that sums of money are now available for exploring new approaches to rural education which these original projects could not attempt because of very limited budgets. Title III funds, in particular, have resulted in a rapid increase in small schools projects so that now almost every one of the fifty states is operating some sort of program.

A discouraging note has been that these new Title III Projects have begun by duplicating the efforts, profitable and unprofitable, of the established projects. This is natural; the same isolation which spawned rural education and small schools projects also hinders dissemination of the results of these projects. The educator from a small school must undertake many more educational and non-educational duties than his or her counterpart in an urban school; this results in limited time for keeping up with progress in other rural schools or for reporting widely what unusual things his or her school is doing.

Recognizing this surge in rural education efforts, the potential of new technology and the fruitless duplication of rather commonplace activities, twenty-five people, representing a dozen of the major rural education projects, five regional education laboratories and a number of their organizations, met in Las Vegas in March, 1967. The outcome of this meeting was the formation of a five-man steering committee which met in Salt Lake City, April 28, 1967 to plan NFIRE, the National Federation for the Improvement of Rural Education.

NFIRE is viewed by the rural educators who have established it as the next step in the on-going effort to reach the goal of a comparable education for rural youth. For years, the few concerted efforts at small school improvement had to work in isolation because the areas in need of study were so vast in comparison to the limited resources; this is no longer true. Title III and other agencies have made available a huge amount of money which can be used for the improvement of rural education. Duplication of efforts and the consequent waste of these resources for improving rural education cannot be afforded. This is where NFIRE comes in; one of its major purposes will be to coordinate efforts in rural education improvement so that better use will be made of what resources are available.

The Council for NFIRE will be composed of individuals from small schools improvement projects, universities, organizations concerned with rural education and educators from small schools. Meetings of the Council will be held at national conventions of organizations such as the Rural Education Department of the NEA.

The board of Directors will include one representative from each major organization concerned with small school improvement. This board will select an Executive Committee which will work closely with a permanent executive secretary and staff.

Under the coordinating efforts of the Executive Committee and

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TEACHERS' LACK—(Continued from preceding page)

Conclusion

The finding that significant differences exist between school personnel and educational researchers in their understandings of research language and procedures is not surprising. It still is of importance because of the pressures on administrators and teachers to implement new practices, curricula or other "innovations" in education. Many of the "innovations" which school personnel are pressured to accept have been shown to be useless, at least in the setting to which they would be applied.

School personnel should be able to read with understanding the research in education in order to reach competent decisions not affected by the efforts of many pressure groups. This will require a two-fold effort as shown by the results of this study. First, school personnel must attempt to study the language of research to be able to understand it in their reading; possibly in-service programs should be developed to cover this topic. Secondly, educational researchers should write their reports in language which school personnel can be expected to understand.

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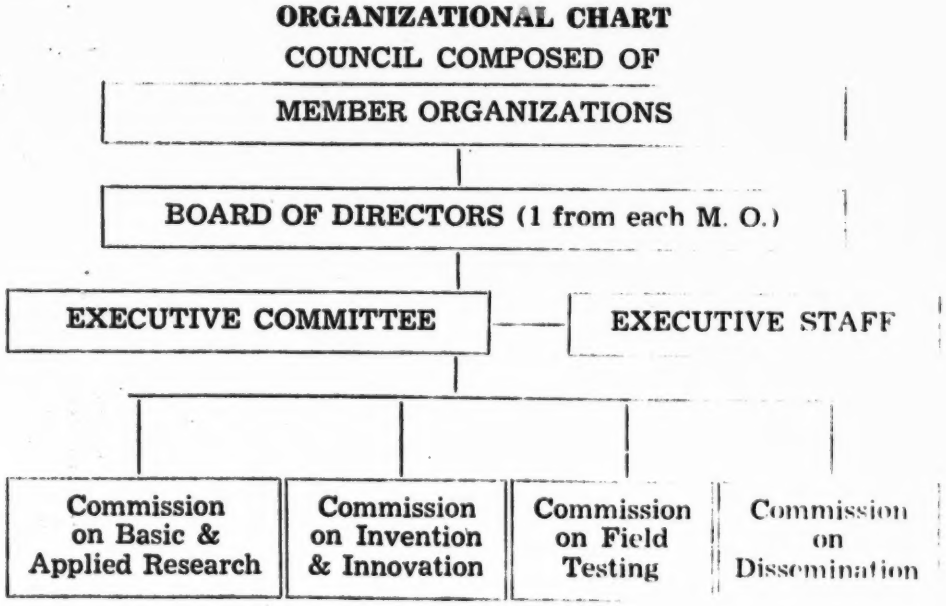
staff will be four arms or "commissions": dissemination, evaluation and field testing, pure and applied research, and invention. Many of these commissions are already operating, such as the ERIC center for small schools at New Mexico State University, which will be the dissemination arm, and the many small schools projects which will form the evalution and field testing arm. The University of North Dakota is being seriouly considered as the pure and applied research arm, details of which will be described later.

A diagram of the organizational structure for NFIRE appears below.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



NFIRE—(Continued from preceding page)

It should be clearly understood that the coordination efforts of NFIRE are to be informal. NFIRE will not control the commissions under it, but, rather will be controlled by the commissions. This circular effect can best be seen by realizing that representatives of the organizations forming the commissions will also form a good share of the membership of the Council for NFIRE, will form the bulk of the Board of Directors and will have a major voice in electing the Executive Committee. Thus NFIRE is a voluntary organization for, in effect, policing itself.

The next stage in the formation of NFIRE is the first national meeting to be held at the University of North Dakota, June 8 and 9, 1967. At this meeting the organizers of NFIRE will finalize plans for a formal constitution and discuss immediate and long-range programs.

The staff at the University of North Dakota is deeply concerned with the success of this effort as with all rural education improvement efforts. The staff has worked closely with one of the outstanding small schools projects, the Upper Midwest Small Schools Project. Since North Dakota is considered the most rural of our fifty states, the University has a responsibility to take active interest in any effort to improve rural education. Already, University staff efforts in research and service to total education have been recognized by the Upper Midwest Regional Educational Laboratory, which has provided funds for a rural education research specialist at the University to provide services to rural schools in the five-state region of North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin. The University, through the Bureau of Educational Research, is providing some funds to expand this effort nationwide by establishing the Center for Research in Rural Education. The Center has as its advisory committee the board members of NFIRE. Additional funds are now being sought to expand the staff and activities in research, thus placing the University of North Dakota truly in the forefront of rural education improvement.